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Humanitarian situation in the Middle East

Note by the Secretary-General

Pursuant to a request by members of the Security Council at the consultations of the whole held on 28 July 2006, the Secretary-General hereby transmits the briefing delivered on the same day to Council members by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, on the humanitarian situation in the Middle East.

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Statement of the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator to the Security Council on the humanitarian situation in the Middle East

28 July 2006

I have just returned from a six-day mission to three war zones: Lebanon, northern Israel, and Gaza. I was an eyewitness to the devastating effects of the current hostilities on civilians. I met with humanitarian colleagues to plan the necessary emergency operations to address the worsening humanitarian situation in the region. I also had the opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister of Lebanon, Fouad Siniora, and key ministers of his Cabinet, as well as the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri. In Israel, I met with the Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, and the Defence Minister Amir Peretz. I also had a meeting with the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and his key advisers.

The Middle East is at a crossroads. My fear is that more violence, more missiles, more terror, and more destruction creates more anger, more hatred, and more disillusioned youths, and ultimately leads to less security throughout the region. Civilians on all sides are the losers of this endless cycle of violence.

Lebanon

The humanitarian situation in Lebanon is dramatic: tens of thousands are fleeing the fighting; hundreds are wounded; and dozens die every day. I witnessed, at first hand, how the civilian population is caught in the crossfire. The destruction, the number of casualties, and the fear and terror inflicted by the continued air strikes was greater than I had expected. The situation, already terrible when I arrived in the region, last Sunday, got worse by the day. Beirut, just three weeks ago the vibrant symbol of Lebanon's recovery from civil war, is now a virtual ghost town. Young people are thinking of leaving the country, as they have lost confidence in a peaceful future in Lebanon.

Lebanese and international humanitarian organizations are trying to come to the relief of as many people as possible. Today, another 10-truck United Nations convoy, painstakingly, made its way from Beirut to Saida and inland to Jezzine. What used to be a 1½-hour drive has now become a 6-hour ordeal, on totally clogged roads. We have established humanitarian corridors by land and by sea to Beirut as well as a notification channel to the Israeli forces to guarantee safe passage for the increasing number of our convoys. They provide urgently needed relief items to hundreds of thousands in the south of Lebanon and other areas such as the Bekaa Valley.

We are hoping to provide some 10,000 tons of relief supplies in the next month alone through these corridors, which I called for in my briefing to you last Friday and in my letters to the Israeli and Lebanese Governments of last week. That is provided there are no attacks on any of our convoys from any of the parties involved. The direct hit sustained by the United Nations post in Khiam, resulting in the tragic killing of our colleagues, has caused considerable anxiety among our relief workers. The hit took place despite repeated notifications and assurances to spare the post. If we agree on notification procedures with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), as we have, then we must be able to absolutely trust that the chain of

command within IDF is working. Just this morning I have received reports that a non-United Nations relief convoy was hit in the south of Lebanon.

Yet it must be clear to all, the parties to the conflict and the members of the Security Council, that the limited and carefully controlled assistance we will be able to provide through this notification system with IDF is not enough to prevent the excessive suffering of the civilian population. We need an immediate cessation of hostilities, followed by a ceasefire agreement, the deployment of a security force, and the political settlement of the conflict, as proposed by the Secretary-General.

The level of displacement, primarily from southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, has now reached approximately 700,000. An estimated 100,000 people are victims of the siege of their homes, towns and villages. Already, some 210,000 have fled Lebanon as refugees to the neighbouring Syrian Arab Republic and Cyprus. Among them are 115,000 third-country nationals, many of whom do not have the financial means to travel back to their home countries. Every day of fighting displaces tens of thousands more.

It was heartbreaking to visit some of these internally displaced persons in the Metn region of Lebanon, a Druze area. Several hundreds, 85 per cent of whom are women, children, and even babies, were cramped into a school with six toilets, each small classroom filled with some 20 people and the few belongings they were able to bring along. Already among the poorest, they have lost their belongings and are now faced with skyrocketing prices for basic goods. This small region alone is host to more than 250,000 displaced, of whom 67,000 are sheltered in schools, hospitals or community centres.

There, I also met some of the survivors from the village of Srifa in south Lebanon where 20 people died during the air strikes on 19 July. Their desperate appeal to me was that the bodies of their killed family members be recovered from the rubble of their homes. "We cannot sleep at night", one woman said. "We have heard that the dogs are eating their bodies." This is one of the cases I raised directly with the Israeli authorities, requesting their assistance in facilitating the recovery and burial of the bodies in accordance with Islamic tradition.

The civilian death toll in Lebanon stands now at more than 600, according to the Minister of Health. The majority are women and children. In the Dahiyeh suburb of south Beirut, a Hizbollah stronghold, I could see the devastating effects of 10 days of massive air strikes on a residential area. Apartment buildings of 6 to 10 storeys had been levelled, block by block. The rubble was covered with schoolbooks, children's clothing, photographs, and other personal belongings.

I urged the Foreign Minister and the Defence Minister of Israel in my meetings to review the conduct of the air strikes and bombardments to avoid excessive use of force that inflicts disproportionate suffering on the civilian population. When there are clearly more dead children than actual combatants, the conduct of hostilities must be reviewed.

At the same time, I repeatedly and publicly appealed from within Lebanon that the armed men of Hizbollah must stop their deplorable tactic of hiding ammunition, arms, or combatants among civilians. Using civilian neighbourhoods as human camouflage is abhorrent and in violation of international humanitarian law.

The ongoing air strikes have crushed civilian infrastructure in many parts of Lebanon. Airports, seaports, roads and bridges have been systematically destroyed. An example is the destruction of the Mdeirij Bridge, the highest in the Middle East, on the main highway connecting Beirut and Damascus. The bridge was the result of a four-year joint development venture with Italy and considered vital to the economy of Lebanon. The bridge was rendered unusable in the first days of the conflict and is now, just like the coastal highway from Beirut via Saida to Tyre, impossible to use, even for relief convoys. The damage to infrastructure is already estimated at billions of dollars and will severely hamper an early economic recovery of Lebanon from this conflict.

Northern Israel

The devastating impact of this conflict on the civilian population is not confined to Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli civilians suffer as well. Daily Hizbollah rocket attacks are spreading constant fear and terror among the civilian population. In Haifa, I saw the damage done by one of the 80 Katyusha rocket attacks to a three-storey residential family home. The civilian population spends much of the time in shelters. Altogether, the attacks have left some 20 dead and hundreds wounded by more than 1,000 rockets that so far have rained indiscriminately on the population in northern Israel.

In fact, while in Haifa meeting with the Foreign Minister, we had to take shelter ourselves when one such Katyusha rocket hit the city. These senseless attacks must stop. As the mayor of Haifa told me, "the attacks have undermined the very moderate forces in Israel who argued for a withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and who promoted peace and reconciliation with Arab neighbours".

Occupied Palestinian Territory

As we call for an immediate ceasefire, political solutions and security arrangements in Lebanon, we must ensure that we do not forget to address the armed conflict and deepening social and economic crisis in Gaza, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory as a whole. Renewed fighting just a day after my visit to Gaza killed a 3-year-old Palestinian girl. Altogether, 150 have lost their life since the present conflict broke out in June, one quarter of whom are reported to be children.

When visiting Gaza, I was deeply saddened to find the great visions that we had in Oslo for a peaceful and prosperous Palestine, coexisting in safety and security with a recognized Israel, shattered. Those hopes have been replaced by a deep sense of despair and disillusionment. The destruction of vital civilian infrastructure such as bridges, roads, and the only electrical power plant in Gaza, the ongoing closure of most border crossings into and out of Gaza, and frequent roadblocks are suffocating any attempt at building a viable economic and social infrastructure in Gaza. As a result, anger and the readiness to resort to militant violence seem to be growing, particularly among young people.

I saw the destruction of every single transformer of the power plant in Gaza, covering 55 per cent of Gaza's electricity needs, including that of homes, schools and hospitals. Today, private households, hospitals, and water pumps receive some three to four hours of electricity supply per day, often not synchronized with the few hours during which water is being supplied. Some Israeli officials have conceded that the destruction of this purely civilian installation was indeed unwise.

The repeated destruction of infrastructure is also taking its toll on aid workers. It was disheartening to feel their sense of frustration and disillusionment. The produce from the greenhouses erected as part of James Wolfenson's efforts was all destroyed in the recent violence as were the bridges built by UNDP with European aid over several years. Some of our colleagues are ready to give up. But we cannot allow this to happen. How can we give up on 1.4 million inhabitants of Gaza, half of them children? It is now, more than ever, that the Occupied Palestinian Territory needs our collective assistance.

The following needs to happen in Gaza:

- **Violence must stop**. We must support the efforts of President Abu Mazen and international mediators aimed at stopping militants from lobbing Qassam rockets at Israeli settlements and releasing the soldier held in captivity. Israel, in turn, must end its often excessive and disproportionate use of force, as was the case in the destruction of the power plant and the shelling that takes the lives of civilians.

- **Rebuild vital infrastructure**. We must help the Palestinian Authority to re-establish a social and economic infrastructure that will provide employment and hope, and help to curb the extreme radicalization of Gaza's youth.

- **Open border crossings**. We encourage the Israeli authorities to establish a transparent and reliable regime at the key crossing point into and out of Gaza. I have proposed to the Defence Minister a regular weekly working meeting between IDF and the United Nations to facilitate the transport of humanitarian and other urgently needed goods into Gaza.

Conclusions

Throughout my mission to all three war zones my public message was consistent:

- The indiscriminate rain of rockets into Israel must stop.

- The excessive and disproportionate use of force by the Israel Defense Forces in both Lebanon and Gaza must stop.

- The hiding of armed combatants and weaponry among the civilian populations in Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory must stop.

- And, most importantly, as the Secretary-General has repeatedly said, we need a cessation of hostilities immediately.

As a first step, I am recommending to the Secretary-General, and through him to you, a humanitarian truce. We need at least 72 hours of tranquillity for the sake of the children of Lebanon and northern Israel who, I believe, we all agree are the innocent victims of this escalating conflict. During this humanitarian truce a major operation could be staged with ICRC, the Lebanese Red Cross, and the United Nations and its partner organizations to do the following:

- First, relocate the children, the wounded, the disabled, and the elderly who have not been able to escape the fighting in the worst war zones.

- Second, resupply hospitals and health centres, particularly in the south, with emergency medical relief items and fuel for generators to avoid a complete breakdown of public health facilities caring for the thousands of wounded.
- Third, provide water and sanitation facilities, food and other basic supplies to the tens of thousands of displaced who are seeking shelter in public buildings in the conflict zones.
- Fourth, establish an emergency communication system to vulnerable communities allowing us to address acute needs urgently where and when they arise.

In conclusion: we humanitarians will do what we can to save lives and alleviate suffering. But, as stated before, aid in itself is not the solution. It is only a temporary "plaster on the wound". Only an end to the fighting and a political settlement that will give the peoples of Israel, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory the security and socio-economic conditions they deserve will prevent future conflict and suffering.

As humanitarian workers, we are frustrated and feel that the work on the political and security agreements is too slow. We are afraid that in the meantime the parties to the conflict are continuing its escalation, thereby prolonging the suffering of civilians and causing more hatred and sorrow today that they will regret tomorrow.

Let me end the way I began, with a plea for the immediate protection of the civilian population in all three war zones. Civilians must be protected at any cost. If there are many more dead children in a conflict than armed men, there is something fundamentally wrong, not only with how the armed men behave and where they hide, but also with the way the response is being conducted.

Lebanon

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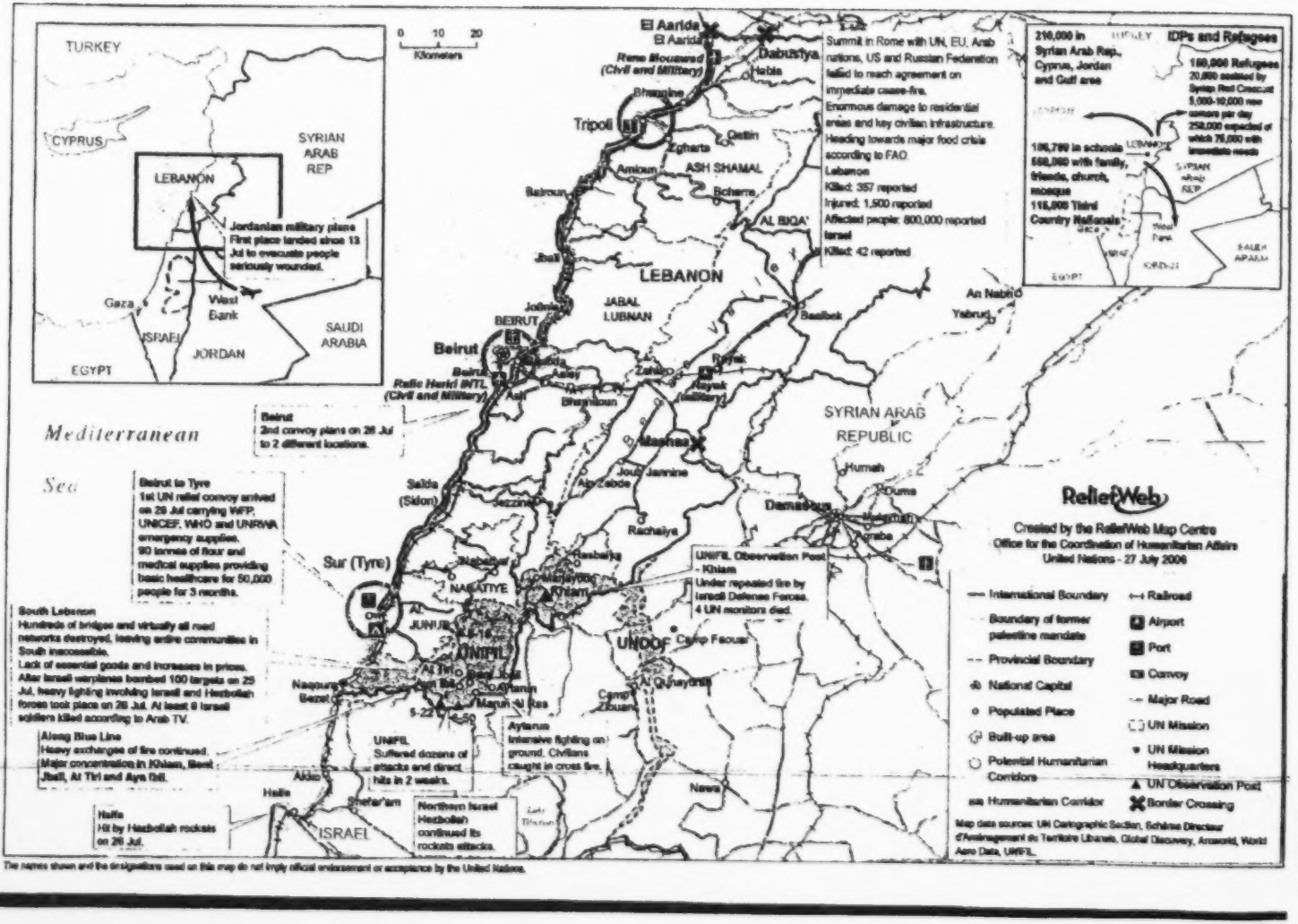

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